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Growing a Dye Garden

Donna Brown



Photo 1: Janice Ford Memorial Dye Garden Photograph by Donna Brown

Imagine looking out from your patio to an inspiring vista of the Denver Botanic Gardens Chatfield Farms (DGB). Add to this a life-long love of natural dyes. Can you envision the garden down there, the blossoms of cosmos and coreopsis, the rows of indigo, the spreading madder, the hopi sunflowers nodding in the breeze? I am Donna Brown and this has been my vision ever since we moved to our “room with a view” that overlooks DGB, a 750 acre native plant refuge and working farm housing the Hildebrand Ranch, an historic homestead with cutting and herb gardens

I am a passionate natural dyer and teach others the art in venues across the United States and abroad. I am also a weaver and member of the Rocky Mountain Weavers Guild (RMWG).

In 2013 the RMWG received a donation from the Ford family in memory of their daughter, Janice Ford, who was an active RMWG member. RMWG approached me to do a natural dye workshop with the monies received –knowing Janice’s love of color. I instead suggested the money be used to start a dye garden. What an opportunity to bring a dream to a reality! With the

guild's approval, I met with Larry Vickerman (Director of the DBG Chatfield Farms) who loved the idea. The RMWG also committed to additional funding to complete the garden irrigation and fencing. Starting in the fall of 2013 a RMWG natural dye group was formed to start researching and selecting dye plants that were appropriate for our area. Some plants were chosen because they are well known, such as Marigolds, Coreopsis, Black-eyed Susan and Cosmos. Other plants, such as Madder and Indigo, were chosen because of what colors they produce. Still others, such as Weld and Dyer's Broom, were picked because of their historic nature. This is the third year for the dye garden and many of the plants started from seed in the DBG greenhouses this year are from seeds of plants grown in the garden last year.

The plants grown in the 2016 garden are: Black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia*), Cota /Navajo Tea (*Thelesperma filifolium*). Cosmos (*Cosmos sulphereus*), Coreopsis (*Coresopsis tinctorial*), Hopi Sunflower (*Helanthus annus*), Black Hollyhock (*Alcea rosea*), Indigo (*Persicaria tinctorial*), Madder (*Rubia Tinctoria*), French Marigold (*Tagestes putula*) , African Marigold (*Tagestes erecta*), Dyers Broom (*Genista tinctoria*), Yarrow (*Achillea millifolium*), Zinnia (*Zinnia elegans*), and Weld (*Reseda tinctorial*).



Yarns dyed from dye garden plants. Photograph by Donna Brown



Paul Tracy showing his tapestry woven with yarns dyed from 2014 dye garden plants. Plants used to dye from top to bottom are:

Weld (*Reseda luteola*), Black Hollyhock (*Alcea rosea*), Cota -Navajo Tea (*Telesperma filifolium*), Yarrow (*Achillea*), Marigold (*Tagetes patula*), Coreopsis Mahogany (*Coreopsis tinctoria*), Zinnia (*Zinnia elegans*), Cosmos (*Cosmos sulphureus*), Madder (*Rubia tinctoria*), Coreopsis calliopsis (*Coreopsis tinctoria*), Indigo (*Polygonum* or *Persicaria tinctoria*). Hopi Black Sunflower (*Helianthus annuus*). Photograph by Donna Brown

Along with doing research on what plants to grow in the garden, the RMWG natural dye garden project members also provide financial support and volunteer time to tend the garden, harvest plant materials for dyeing and dye yarn for sale. Most of the summer the group meets at the

garden at least once a week for weeding and harvesting. A separate building, the old granary, houses a drying system for the dye plants and flowers.



Drying system Photograph by Scott Dressel-Martin

We offer classes to educate the public about natural dyeing. We provide a dye session as part of the DBG summer kid's camp and does dye demonstrations during DBG's special events. There is an outdoor kitchen the group has access to. For the kid's camp the campers pick marigolds from the garden. While the flowers simmer the campers put rubber band on cotton bandannas for resist marks. The bandannas are dyed and then the rubber band are removed and their patterns are revealed. Last year the group clocked over 1200 volunteer hours.



Campers showing off their marigold dyed bandannas. Photograph by Donna Brown

The DBG assists the dye garden project by providing the site, as well as technical and physical assistance from growing seedlings in their greenhouse, to working the soil, installing the irrigation system, providing mulch for the walkways and building the surrounding fence.



Group visits the dye plants growing in the greenhouse. Photograph by Donna Brown

All in all the collaboration between the Natural dye garden project and the DBG has been a rewarding educational project that has grown into something I could have never imagined. The group of RMWG volunteers has developed a friendship that has become a second family for many. I encourage you to look at your community for similar opportunities. If you are in the

Denver area please come visit the dye garden. Look for the sign that tells visitors about the garden.



Signage at the garden Photograph by Donna Brown

You can follow the project on:

Facebook : <https://www.facebook.com/growingadyegarden/>

Interactive blog: <https://growingadyegarden.wordpress.com/>

RMWG website: <http://www.rmweaversguild.org/natural-dye-garden/>

Denver Botanic Gardens Chatfield Farm: <http://www.botanicgardens.org/chatfield-farms/janice-ford-memorial-dye-garden>

Donna Brown Bio:

Donna Brown is a fiber artist from Denver, Colorado. A natural dyer with over 25 years of natural dyeing and teaching in venues across the US, including Penland School of Crafts, and John C Campbell Folk School. She is a natural dye sales representative for the DyeWorks a natural dye company with Table Rock Llamas and Fiber Arts Studio, in Black Forest Colorado. She is also does custom production natural dyeing for companies such as Treenway Silks. Donna is an active DBG volunteer working in the Janice Ford Memorial Dye Garden at DBG Chatfield Farms.

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